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MFA

THE PARCIFAL
Tone PICTURES

MARCIUS-SIMONS

On View at the Galleries of
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The Parsifal Exhibition

M R. MARCIUS-SIMONS for the past ten years has been accumulating material for the realization of a great series of paintings illustrating the entire "Nibelungen Ring." At first he was loth to separate "Parsifal" from its place in the vast scheme. One of his reasons for this reluctance was that, in Wagner's mind, the Holy Grail was nothing but "the treasure of the Nibelungs idealized" or spiritualized, as it were, by Christian thought. Wagner writes, "As the gold—the Ring—is the central motive around which the whole Cycle moves, so is the Grail in 'Parsifal.'" "The search for the Grail replaces now the fight for the gold"; and the Master adds, "The voice that comes from Titurel's tomb is but the voice of Wotan, in whose soul the will of life is destroyed." And to emphasize more clearly the parallelism between Bruennhilde and Kundry (who, like Bruennhilde, rides a magic horse) Wagner gave her in one episode the name of Gundryggia, which signifies Walkuere or Valkyr.

Satisfied at last that the "Ring" series—a mighty work in itself, including twenty or more paintings—did not need this climax, which would be interesting only to the students of Wagner literature, he decided that the mystical side of "Parsifal" would be made more impressive by a separate presentation. But the four paintings of the great religious drama in the "Ring" series were judged, after consideration, insufficient for a separate art display, and it was decided that they should be supplemented by four upright panels, typifying the five characters of the drama, while serving as connecting links in the telling of the story. The affinity between the ideals of Richard Wagner and the painting of Marcius-Simons has long been recognized in Europe. The painter, like the musician, claims to be but a poet, using his art merely as a means of expressing ideas.

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Marcus-Simons believes that the wonderful freedom that the Master of Bayreuth has given to music can be equally realized in the sister art of painting, and that the palette and brush can also give to the present generation what it demands as a condition of greatness in every art—food for thought. Painting, like music, should commence when all other arts purporting to express an idea or a vision fail. “L’art commence, ou la nature finit.”

We talk of the wonderful possibilities of modern music, of the unheard of combinations obtained with the seven notes of the scale. Why should not a painter paint, as a musician scores? Marcus-Simons does this.

We are astounded at the polyphony of the modern orchestra. Why not give the same prominence and power of expression to the polychromy of the palette?

Do, re, mi, fa, sol, la, si are the seven factors of music. Red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo and violet are the factors in painting.

Wagner has proved that the power of expression in music has no limit. Why should that same power be limited in painting? In a picture every item should be studied with a purpose, and it should be impossible to imagine a work, once finished, as otherwise conceived, if intended to express the same idea.

We have briefly embodied some of Mr. Marcus-Simons’ ideas in the composition of his “Parsifal” pictures in order to help the public, without too prolonged a study, to enter more fully into the spirit in which they were conceived and realized. Assiduous examination will bring to light details too numerous to mention.

The Parsifal Tone-Paintings

Gurnemanz

Die Erzählung. (The Narrative)

When the curtain is withdrawn on the stage at Bayreuth, Gurnemanz and two youths are discovered lying asleep under a tree. They wake, and the drama opens with a morning prayer. Later in the act Gurnemanz tells, in a long recitative, the story of the Grail, which is of great importance, as it unfolds to us all that has taken place before the drama commences.

In the corresponding painting both these episodes have been welded together. One of the youths, kneeling still, seems to be finishing the prayer; while the other listens in wonderment to the story the old esquire is reciting. In the distance we see the Gralsburg and the waters of the lake, on which float two swans, thus foreshadowing the coming action of "Parsifal." In the drama, Kundry, in her wild disguise, is on the stage when the story is told, as are two of the esquires. But her appearance, as well as theirs in the picture, would detract from the typical character of the title, and the whole composition would no longer recall to the spectator the impressive and beautiful opening strains of the music inscribed below the painting.

II

The Blood of Christ

"Wie hell gruesst uns heute der Herr!"

The Communion, or Love Feast, episode in the first act is perhaps the most impressive in the whole drama. As a foreground, and to enable him to introduce the figure of Kundry, the artist has used the moving scenery through which Parsifal passes as he walks towards the pealing bells with Gurnemanz. In the Temple itself Marcius-Simons has adhered to the lines and disposition of Bayreuth. It was his purpose to give, not so much a presentation of the

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Wagnerstadt performances, which would enable anyone who had been there to recognize Parsifal immediately, but rather a lasting memento of how Wagner himself saw the stage pictures and wished them to be seen. The decorative details of this hall, which is shown three times in the series, change, however, suiting themselves to the moods of occurring events. In the first Temple picture the whole centre is a mosaic of gold, which recalled—when the painting formed part of the “Ring” series—the gold of the Nibelung treasure, replaced now by the Grail, whose effulgence floods the whole architecture with crimson rays.

The *leitmotif* underlying “Parsifal” is the Pure-Fool *motif*, characterizing his present personality; while in the figure of Kundry the *Wildheit*, the Wild *motif*, expresses the phase of her dual existence when she roams around the Gralsburg seeking to serve. Her attitude, shading her eyes to see better, alludes to her recognition of Parsifal, which, in reality, takes place after the death of the Swan. The central *motif* is the Gral *motif*, as it appears in the orchestra when Amfortas replaces the Grail upon the altar.

III

Kundry and Klingsor

Die Beschwörung. (The Incantation)

In this upright canvas we see Kundry writhing under the spell of the magician, and uttering her weird shriek of woe, mixed with hellish laughter, which is her famous *motif*. She appears in all her radiant beauty, an evil smile faintly discernible on her lips, as she wakes against her will to her mission of seductive deviltry. The brown serpent-girdled robe—the livery of the wild phase of her double life—falls from her limbs.

The *leitmotifs* inscribed below this panel are, naturally, Kundry's shriek and the Klingsor *motif*, which appear in the orchestration as the magician cries: “Herauf! Zu mir! Dein Meister ruft!”

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IV

Klingsor's Magic Garden

Die Blumenmädchen. (The Flower Maidens)

This was, perhaps, one of the most difficult compositions to condense. The occurrences of a long act are compressed into one single picture. The attitude of Parsifal, his features expressing the sadness of the Gralstrauer, which has suddenly come to him, was not easy to create, as Wagner explains that, in Parsifal, the struggle is purely a mental one. Until Wagner came its realization in music seemed equally difficult.

Kundry's appearance as she sings the sad strains of the Herzeleide theme is so touching, and in such pictorial contrast to her wild aspect in the first act, and to her personification of the Magdalen in the last act, that the artist in fact had no choice but to paint her as she is seen on the stage. Her cries and stormy attitudes later on, when repulsed by Parsifal, would have recalled the figure in the preceding picture.

Klingsor, amidst the flowers on the extreme right, poisoning the Sacred Lance, stained with Christ's Blood, ready to hurl the weapon at Parsifal, with the bleak mountains in the background, suggests the closing scene of the "Zauberei"—the magical episode in the drama.

The celebrated Kose *motif* of the Flower Maidens is naturally the central one below the picture. Beneath Klingsor is the ascending scale of the flight of the Spear. Below Kundry might have been put the Thor *motif*, on which she utters the call, "Parsi Fal, Fal Parsi!" But the claims of Herzeleide, of which she sings without leaving her couch, were paramount.

V

Parsifal

Der heilige Speer. (The Sacred Lance)

The next painting shows us Parsifal, after his long search for the Grail, indicated in the landscape by the far-

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stretching wilderness of arid mountains and rock-strewn path. The magic garden picture is thus, as it were, framed by Kundry on one side and on the other by Parsifal. They are the great actors in the tragic struggle for the defense and victory of a soul. The sun has just burst through the clouds behind the Gralsburg, which stands at last revealed.

The only *leitmotif* is, of course, the Parsifal *motif*, but as it is heard in the third act when Parsifal plants the Spear in the ground.

VI

Good Friday's Spell

Der Charfreitagzauber

Several successive actions of the characters are, in this important picture, synthetized in a single group. Kundry, after washing and drying with her hair the feet of Parsifal, is handing him the phial of perfumed oil, while he contemplates the flowering meadow, and Gurnemanz baptizes him before anointing him King. To the left is seen a hermit's hut of branches, which shape themselves on the roof somewhat in the form of a cross. In the far distance gleam the waters of the lake, already seen in the Gurnemanz picture. And the Gralsburg rises glorious in the light of a rainbow—the sign of promise—shining through the vanishing clouds.

Beneath the group is the Parsifal *motif*—this time in broad and majestic coloring—and the Dienst *motif* of Kundry, which marks her last transformation. In the centre is the Charfreitag *motif*; to the left the beautiful "Blumenaue" *motif*, best known to the general public as the wonderful "Good Friday's Spell" music.

VII

Amfortas

Die Heilung. (The Healing)

We return to Amfortas, whom we have already seen in the second painting, writhing on his couch of pain. He

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has refused to uncover the Grail. Tearing open his garments, he has exposed his wound and implored the knights to kill him and end his misery. Parsifal touches the wound with the Sacred Lance. Amfortas, in the agony of repentant grief, contemplates the divine blood which flows upon the point of the sacred weapon.

And here we call attention to an artistic idea which is most typical and clear in its purpose, in its assimilation of painting to a musical score, as conceived by Wagner. Wagner used the musical melody of a *leitmotif* to indicate what was passing in the mind of the human being—thoughts completely different from the words uttered at the time. In the picture before us, the grief, the remorse of Amfortas only are depicted in the figure; but in the decoration of the hall we find the Flower Maidens, indicating that the remembrance of his seduction and his fall must torture him as he contemplates the Blood of the Saviour so long desecrated by his impure hands.

The grief-stricken *motif* of Amfortas is inscribed beneath the picture.

VIII

The Redeemer

Der Erlæser

The magnificent ending of a magnificent score. It needs no description.

The celestial and invisible choir heard in this scene is rendered comprehensible to the eye by the ethereal figures of Angels worshipping the Holy Blood. For a like purpose the corpse of Titurel is seen lying stark and cold on the bier. On the stage, when Parsifal makes the sign of the Cross, Titurel lifts himself up for an instant—brought to life again by the sight of the Holy Grail. Had Titurel been painted thus it would have been impossible to convey the impression of his death, as, owing to the unavoidable

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disposition of the hall, his back only could have been seen. There is no suggestion in the drama as to how Kundry is to die except in the words, "She sinks to the ground, her gaze fixed on Parsifal." With marvelous inspiration the artist makes her lie upon the altar steps in the form of a cross. At last she finds the Saviour's look, which she has so long sought to meet in a lover's eyes. The closing strains of the music drama, combining the Thor and the Abendmahl *motifs*, form the written comment on the last painting in the series.

Many lovely episodes of the drama have, perforce, been omitted in the pictorial rendering of the score. The celebrated entrance of Parsifal, with the oft-repeated "Das weiss ich nicht!" which establishes in such masterful manner his mentality; that gem of poetical pathos, the funeral march of the dead Swan; the procession of the youths, solemnly bearing in the veiled shrine; the changing of the Flower Maidens to withered leaves and branches, lying amidst the ruins of Klingsor's magic garden,—all these, says Marcius-Simons, all these would have made beautiful paintings. The artist's aim, however, was *not* the mere *illustration* of "Parsifal," but the interpretation of Wagner's score in a series of tone pictures, comprising the chief events of the poem only,—the scenes, in which the drama soars to its full significance, while the music sends its remembrance to pulsate in every tone of the paintings.

THE SMALL PAINTINGS

These sketches, which show how the larger works were at first conceived when they formed part of the "Ring" series, are catalogued with appropriate titles to emphasize their character. These small paintings were begun and completed in Bayreuth.

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NO. 1

The blood-red glow flooding the Grail Temple in the large canvas does not exist in this sketch; neither is this effect produced on the stage of the Festspielhaus, although indicated in the score.

NO. 2

The greatest difference between the sketches and the large pictures exists, however, in the Flower Maidens. The necessity of studying out the figures here, to arrive at a complete mastery of the subject, compelled the artist to take as a working ground only a portion of the intended larger canvas, and naturally entailed the necessity of crowding the grouping and curtailing the landscape to a summary indication of its principal features. The sketch is most valuable, showing, as it does, the divergencies between the original idea and the final rendering of the subject.

NO. 3

In the "Flower Meadow" sketch one sees also how the picture was intended to form but one of a long series of others. The subject matter is condensed. In "The Sacred Lance and Parsifal" the armor alone suggests the knight-errant of the Festspielhaus stage. In the large painting these uninteresting accessories were dispensed with, as Parsifal appears in full armor in the preceding upright panel. The sky, with the clouds hiding the Gralsburg, was intended to suggest Parsifal's long and weary search for the Grail. The addition of the "Parsifal" panel enables Marcius-Simons to use this cloud effect only in the "Sacred Lance" picture, and to introduce in the "Good Friday's Spell" composition the rainbow, which emphasizes the meaning of the opening flowers.

NO. 4

There is no difference between this and the larger one. As it stands it was conceived and finished in Bayreuth.

(Signed)

MARCIUS-SIMONS.

